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SUBJECT: MORE ON TURKISH AIRPORT SECURITY

REF: ANKARA 7316

1. (SBU) Summary: In December 3-4 meetings with Turkish officials responsible for aviation security, EconCouns reiterated the USG's strong interest in Turkish airport/aviation security efforts and expressed concern about a loophole in the current system that enables some passengers arriving on international flights to Ankara to evade immigration processing. The officials acknowledged that, due to passenger complaints, aviation authorities had recently abandoned the requirement for all international passengers to go through immigration at their port of entry in Turkey, and that the current system -- based on sorting passengers by the color of their boarding passes -- was not being effectively implemented. Embassy is following up with other GOT agencies. End Summary.

2. (SBU) EconCouns discussed airport/aviation security with Director General of Civil Aviation Topa Toker December 3 and with Turkish National Police Protection Department Chief Mustafa Bal December 4. He welcomed the GOT's new airport security procedures (refTel) and its continued cooperation with TSA on security at Istanbul's Ataturk Airport, and reiterated the USG's continuing interest in Turkish airport/aviation security efforts at domestic as well as international airports. Toker and Bal both stressed that they implemented the same comprehensive security practices at all airports, domestic and international. Bal noted that they had sent a notice to all airports in early November -- before the Istanbul bombings -- urging them to maintain a high level of alert.

3. (SBU) EconCouns expressed concern about the recent reappearance of an apparent loophole in procedures that would enable international travelers to avoid going through Turkish immigration in some cases. Several Embassy officers arriving in Ankara, via Istanbul, on international flights in recent weeks had noticed that airline staff were asking international passengers to board one bus (going to the international terminal) and domestic passengers to board a second bus, going to the domestic terminal, where there is no immigration or customs control. However, at least on these flights, airline staff did not check to verify that passengers boarded the correct bus, meaning that any international passenger could easily have boarded the bus to the domestic terminal and bypassed all entry controls. (Note: International passengers did not pass through immigration or customs in Istanbul. End note)

4. (SBU) Toker and Bal said that, approximately a year ago, in response to similar embassy expressions of concern, aviation authorities had issued instructions requiring all international passengers to go through immigration and customs at the first port of entry (usually, but not always, Istanbul). In response to passenger complaints, however, authorities had reversed that decision effective October 1. Toker and Bal explained that, under the new system, international and domestic passengers received different color boarding passes, and airline staff were required to segregate passengers upon arrival based on those boarding passes. Toker argued that this system was effective.

5. (SBU) EconCouns responded that our own experience indicated that the system was not effective, as Embassy staff had witnessed first-hand on several flights that airline staff were not making any effort to control what in effect was a "self-segregation" mechanism. He added that we considered this loophole to be a serious security problem, and asked that GOT authorities look into it right away.

16. (SBU) Toker agreed to take a look at the system. Bal acknowledged that the airlines did not appear to be implementing the new mechanism in a disciplined manner, and said Embassy's comments would give him ammunition to fight for a return to the pre-October 1 security system. Embassy will continue to press the GOT, including the Ministry of Interior, to close this loophole, and will keep Washington advised of developments. .

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